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FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5687
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RUEHYN/AMEMBASSY SANAA 0290

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/20/2018

TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR PINS PHUM IZ RS TS YM
SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR'S CALL ON FM ABDALLAH: BILATERAL
ISSUES

REF: A. SECTO 8
1B. SECTO 6
1C. STATE 105349
1D. TUNIS 1082

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec, Reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d)

11. (S) Summary: During a meeting with the Ambassador on October 18, FM Abdulwaheb Abdallah said he was making his first trip to Russia in the coming days, accompanied by 23 businessmen. An economic agreement is to be signed. The Ambassador asked for an explanation on the withdrawal of police security from the American school one day before. The FM said he would inquire. The FM praised the Secretary's visit in September, saying President Ben Ali was very pleased to meet her. The Ambassador pressed the Minister to ease Embassy access to government officials. The Minister feigned surprise that there was a problem, blaming other ministries. Separately, the FM's Chief of Staff reported no progress on raising the Tunisian Embassy in Baghdad from the level of Charge d'Affaires to that of Ambassador. The GOT has no response yet on the request for M113's for Yemen. Septels report discussions on access to former Guantanamo Bay detainees and advancing democracy. End summary.

Travel to Russia

12. (C) The Minister said that he was to depart for Russia, stopping in St. Petersburg and then meeting Russian FM Lavrov on Oct. 21. Abdallah noted that this would be his first trip to Russia and that he was looking forward to "discovering" it. The trip had been on the books for two years, following an invitation from Lavrov made during a Tunis visit in November 2005. Abdallah said he had planned a return visit first in 2006 and then 2007 but it kept being pushed back. Abdallah said that 23 businessmen would be accompanying him; the two countries would be signing an accord on an "economic forum". Describing ties as not inconsiderable, Abdallah noted that some 150,000 Russian tourists are now visiting per year and that the Tunisians expect that to double not before long. He heard that 3.5 million Russians visit Turkey each year, and suggested that Tunisia good draw on the Russian demand for foreign travel, especially since prices are reasonable.

Security for the American School

13. (C) The Ambassador asked the Minister for an explanation as to why the police protecting the American Cooperative School in Tunis (ACST) had been withdrawn without explanation or advance warning on October 17. The Ambassador said the action had taken us by surprise and that we did not know the reasoning. The Minister expressed surprise, as did the Chief of Protocol, and said he would inquire of the Minister of

Interior. The Chief of Protocol remarked separately to the DCM that normally such matters would be coordinated through his office and were not in this case.

Happy with the Secretary's Visit

¶4. (C) Abdallah said that President Ben Ali had been very happy with the Secretary's visit. He noted that there was a big difference between hearing about somebody and meeting them in person. Ben Ali greatly appreciated the frank, direct and friendly style of the Secretary. Abdallah noted that in a brief meeting with her in New York she had expressed her pleasure with the visit. The only regret Abdallah had is that the visit had not come sooner, since it allowed her to see the Maghreb region up close.

Seeking Greater Communication with the Government

¶5. (C) The Ambassador raised Ben Ali's comments to the Secretary that the Embassy was not well informed and had too many contacts with oppositionists. Abdallah laughed and noted that the Secretary had immediately replied that the Embassy was well informed. The Ambassador said that the Embassy would like to have more extensive contacts with government officials, but that it is much more difficult to meet with GOT officials than with civil society and opposition representatives. Regular access to the Minister was appreciated but not sufficient. The need for diplomatic notes for practically every matter was a problem; the Embassy has already sent 1377 so far this year, albeit for a range of matters. The Embassy needed easier, direct access to government officials to obtain GOT views and to take advantage of opportunities for cooperation. The Ambassador cited an appointment request that had been pending 15 months.

¶6. (C) Commenting that oppositionists have nothing else to do than to meet with foreigners, the Minister feigned surprise, claiming that the MFA advocated on the Embassy's behalf with other ministries to accept appointments. He described the Ministries of Interior and Justice as the most recalcitrant. Abdallah noted that the Ambassador has raised this issue in the past, and said that President Ben Ali is not against contacts with government personnel, quite the contrary. The Minister claimed that he would tell the President of the Ambassador's concerns.

Diplomatic Representation in Iraq

¶7. (C) The Minister's Chief of Staff told the DCM in an aside that the MFA had not yet moved on raising Tunisian representation in Baghdad from the level of Charge d'Affaires to that of Ambassador.

Request for M113's for Yemen

¶8. (S) The Chief of Staff acknowledged receipt of the request for excess M113's (refs. C and D) and said the question had been referred to the Ministry of Defense. He had no readout to give as to the likely GOT position.

Comment

¶9. (C) As usual, Abdallah was friendly and engaged throughout the meeting, although he appeared tired, perhaps as the result of his recent heavy travel schedule. The discussion of the difficulty of engaging with the GOT is one of the many we have had in recent months with Tunisian officials. Engagement continues to be a significant challenge for the Embassy and for the diplomatic community in Tunis generally. It is a subject of frequent conversation among developed country diplomats and several other Embassies, including the German, UK and Canadian, are also pressing the matter. We will soon present a non-paper to the

MFA on the joint programs, visits and meeting requests that represent "missed opportunities" to fully develop the bilateral relationship. Finally, security at the American schools is an issue in light of the GOT's decision to withdraw police. While we do not believe the GOT would deliberately endanger ACST school children, we believe it would be better to have an armed, visible police presence. We are following up with GOT officials via several avenues. GODEC